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AUTHOR Roth, Lane
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ABSTRACT

The focal image of the film "The Black Hole" functions as a visual metaphor for the sacred, order, unity, and eternal time. The black hole is a symbol that unites the antinomic pairs of conscious/unconscious, water/fire, immersion/emersion, death/rebirth, and hell/heaven. The black hole is further associated with the quest for transcendent experience. Through the symbolic expression of archetypes, the film advocates the abandonment of rationalist ideals and the reclamation of religious experience and the unconscious mind. The titular image of "the Black Hole" compensates scientism by invoking archetypal unity. (RS)

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Compensating Scientism Through *The Black Hole*

by Lane Roth

The symbolic expression of archetypes can be expected in popular films, but it is particularly striking in recent science fiction films.[1] These movies have a compensatory function that C. G. Jung associates with the "visionary mode of artistic creation." According to Jung, "recoiling from the unsatisfying present the yearning of the artist reaches out to that primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the insufficiency and onesidedness of the spirit of the age."[2] Contemporary science fiction films are *par excellence* products of "the spirit of the age," technology and science. Yet these same films tend thematically to compensate the scientism characteristic of secular, technologized society. Disowning technology and its foundations, science and reason, as insufficient to elucidate human existence, the films advocate mythic, magico-religious ideas through the animation of archetypes. For example, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, and *The Empire Strikes Back* are all essentially stories of the archetypal quest which communicate values that reject rationalism as a philosophy.[3]

The Black Hole, Walt Disney Productions' first big-budget science fiction film further illustrates this compensatory tendency. The movie is replete with images of technology: spaceships, robots, laser guns, and computers. Nevertheless the central image is the black hole which gives the film its title. A black hole is, as we understand it, a theoretical astronomical phenomenon that "can emit no light or lightlike radiation," and therefore can never be seen.[4] Any

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visualization of a black hole must necessarily be an expression of the human mind, which is only partially conscious. In recognition of this, Peter Ellenshaw, Production Designer of *The Black Hole*, states: "I think that my design of the black hole came by working back through my subconscious."[5] Ellenshaw's statement corresponds to Jung's description of the visionary mode's method of artistic creation, in which the artist "is overwhelmed with a flood of thoughts and images which it was never his aim to beget and which his will would never have fashioned."[6]

Ellenshaw's vision of the black hole is circular, as opposed to other geometric or irregular shapes that a hole could logically assume. The circular shape of the black hole relates to the *mandala*, Sanskrit for "circle," which Jung identifies as "the symbol of totality."[7] It is an archetype "found in all epochs and in all places, always with the same meaning" (*FS*, p. 18), and "plays the chief role in uniting apparently irreconcilable opposites" (*FS*, p. 21). In *The Black Hole* the titular image, it will be shown, represents unity of the following dichotomies: the conscious and the unconscious, water and fire, immersion and emersion, death and rebirth, hell and heaven. In the film the black hole's dominant visual qualities are its circularity, shape (figure-ground), rotation, coloration; and its appearance as fire, water, and tunnel. These properties are symbolic of archetypal unity, sacrality, order, eternity, death and rebirth, and passage to transmundane experience. These symbols will be discussed in turn, drawing upon the insights of Jung, Mircea, Eliade, and others.

The black hole is the dominant shape, aside from the spaceships, distinct from the space surrounding it. Even in interior shots of the *Cygnus*, the mile-long exploratory spaceship that is the setting for most of the film's storyline, the black hole remains conspicuous in the background, seen through windows. The black hole is a part of nature and yet is a rupture in it. The black hole in the film is ascribed a unique ontological status because it is said to be "the largest" by the information robot Vincent, who calls the black hole a "rip in the very fabric of space and time."[8] Dr. Hans Reinhardt, the mad scientist who commands the *Cygnus*, claims that inside the black hole, "long-cherished laws of nature simply do not apply." Astrophysicist Dr. Alex Durant, a member of the spaceship *Palomino*'s crew who investigate the *Cygnus*, agrees that the black hole is "a point where time and space, as we understand it, no longer exists." The reiteration of this idea is an explicit rejection of rationalism, a philosophical system that is the basis for much of our science and technology. Rationalism assumed nature to be ordered by mathematical laws capable of comprehension by the essentially rational human mind. John Herman Randall, Jr. explains that the universe, based on the metaphor of "the Newtonian world machine," was held to be a "uniform mathematical system."[9]

By contrast, the black hole represents order because it is a manifestation of the sacred. It corresponds to what Eliade considers "the primary religious experience" of a break in space which "reveals an absolute fixed point" essential to the creation of order.[10] Such an orientation cannot be found in "the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space," the fragmented, amorphous,

and neutral space of our desacralized, industrial society (pp. 22-24). Nevertheless Eliade insists that our "experience of profane space still includes values that to some extent recall the nonhomogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space" (p. 24). That is, we continue to designate "privileged places, qualitatively different from all others," that reveal a sense of an entirely "other" or "numinous" reality (p. 24). This "numinous quality of all archetypal products" is also indicated by Jung (*FS*, p. 109).

In the film Reinhardt speaks of the black hole as "another place and another *time*." Our desacralized time, Eliade observes, "presents itself as a precarious and evanescent duration, leading irremediably to death" (p. 113). By contrast, sacred, cyclic, Platonic time, represented by the revolving circle, "is the moving image of unmoving eternity" (p. 109). This symbol for "other" time appears in *The Black Hole* as a spiral that rotates perpetually in a clockwise motion. The dialog reinforces this visualization of immortality, when Reinhardt assures a captivated Durant that the implication of the black hole's suspension of natural laws is "life forever."

First shown as a holographic image projected in the *Palomino* control room, the black hole is light blue. Framed in the same shot as this image, Harry Booth exclaims, "Right out of Dante's *Inferno*!" even though the blue color patently contradicts his verbal metaphor. Seen from a distance in space, the black hole continues to look blue. It is only when the *Cygnus* enters the black hole near the end of the film, that its color changes abruptly to red. The blue

-red color opposition signifies the dialectic water-fire. Both are embodied by the black hole. According to Jung, fire is commutable with water (*FS*, p. 104).

Water symbolism is associated by Eliade with death and rebirth, as it involves both immersion and emersion. Immersion is the "dissolution of forms," while "emersion repeats the cosmogonic act of formal manifestation" (p. 130). *The Black Hole*'s dialog is appropriately contradictory about this paradox. Reinhardt threatens to "liquidate"--rather than kill, eliminate, despatch, etc.--his guests. Durant refers to the black hole as "the most destructive force in the universe," and as "the deadliest force in the universe," but soon he is enthralled by Reinhardt's suggestion that the black hole offers "life forever."

The probe ship, unlike the *Cygnus*, survives its entry into the black hole. Its "dissolution of form" upon immersion into the black hole is visually communicated by special effects which distort, through rotation and dilation of the image, the normal space occupied by the survivors. When the probe emerges from the black hole, the dilation effect is discontinued, and the rolling effect progressively diminishes, so that the images regain their proper form.

The final shot of the film tilts upward to a circle of light in the center of a star field. The circle (star) appears to be below and behind an opaque circle of equal size (a planet). The probe enters the bottom frame center and recedes into the background in an upward flight. The probe silhouette above the craft's circular, blazing engine exhaust is a smaller version of the planetary-stellar configuration toward which it moves. As the probe vanishes into the dazzling

light, the shot ends in a freeze frame. The obvious fertility image, suggesting sperm and egg, is a symbol of rebirth.

Death and rebirth constitute passage to and from somewhere other than this world. Eliade writes of the "fundamental mystical experience" of "transcending the human condition" (p. 175), and that the "possibility of transcendence is expressed by various *images of an opening*" (p. 26, orig. emph.). As a symbolic opening to mystical experience, the black hole is similar to the hole Alice passes through to Wonderland. Reinhardt envisions the intended passage through the black hole as travelling "in, through, and beyond." *Palomino* scientist Dr. McCrae describes the black hole as "that long dark tunnel." This image correlates with the experience of ritual passage as described by anthropologist Victor Turner as "*cunicular*, being in a tunnel."[11]

Transiting the black hole is visualized in the film as speeding through a tunnel or tubular corridor. This visualization reverberates through four similar photographic images. The first image shows the *Palomino* crew initially inspecting the *Cygnus* on an automatic sled that travels through a long glass tube. From their point of view, the camera dollies forward through the tunnel. The second image is a repetition of this forward dolly through the glass tube, but now with a dizzying rotation of the sled and its passengers, due to structural stress from the *Cygnus*' entry into the black hole. The third image is the inverse of the first two, because a background object moves toward a stationary camera: a massive, circular, fiery meteor rolls with devastating force through the latticed *Cygnus* interior corridor toward the foreground. These three images

anticipate the tunnel-like passage through the black hole. The fourth image is a forward dolly through an arched corridor, which concludes a "hell-heaven" sequence during the passage through the black hole.

Water symbolism has been discussed in connection with death and rebirth. According to Eliade, "aquatic symbolism" also refers to the "religious valorization of the waters" (p. 129). The formlessness of the waters preceded the creation of the earth, which is the meaning of the passage from *Genesis* which Reinhardt quotes in the film: "And darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Delivering this line, Reinhardt is photographed from a low camera angle, so that he is seen looking down on the film's characters and the audience. This close-up shot frames Reinhardt with a circular, lit chandelier behind him, which operates as a metaphorical halo. Reinhardt appears to be a biblical prophet, not a rational scientist.

The dialog contains other metaphors relating the black hole to Judeo-Christian images. Harry Booth's reference to Dante's *Inferno* directly follows his exclamation, "My God!" Reinhardt's quotation from *Genesis* is heard immediately after Durant describes Reinhardt's proposed penetration of the black hole as "a glorious pilgrimage straight into what may be the mind of God." There is also reference to the Christian devil. Upon viewing the holographic image of the black hole, the *Palomino*'s First Mate Charlie Pizer says, "I expect to spot some guy in red with horns and a pitchfork."

The dialog prefigures visual metaphors of hell and heaven presented during the probe ship's journey through the black hole. These images constitute a wordless sequence inserted between framing shots of the probe and its crew. The sequence begins with a frightening encapsulation of Reinhardt inside his psychic double, the "Frankenstein's monster" robot, Maximillian, both of whom had been destroyed soon after the *Cygnus* entered the black hole. We are then shown Maximillian-Reinhardt standing atop a promontory, overseeing immense, lambent flames and twisted shapes. The image is clearly infernal. Maximillian-Reinhardt's metallic exoskeleton is red, and some of the robot's multiple arms bend upward like horns. Two of the limbs, as shown earlier, are equipped with sharp, silver blades which resemble pitchforks when they are fully extended.

The shot of hell is directly followed by the sequence's concluding shot of a shining, vaulted corridor through which the camera dollies forward, toward a brilliant white circle of light. Entering center frame from the top is the superimposed image of an unidentified female, seen only from the rear, who precedes the camera and disappears into the light. The phantom bears no resemblance to Dr. Kate McCrae (Yvette Mimieux), the only woman in the film. The superimposed image itself has an inherent ghostly quality.[12] Further, the entire shot occurs in the context of a sequence whose numinous or other-worldly reality has already been established. For these reasons the identity of the mysterious figure may be clarified by seeking congruity between the film's images and literary images alluded to in the movie's dialog. Possibly the white-

robed woman who glides underneath the cathedral-like arches corresponds to the anima, Jung's feminine archetype of the soul, which Charles Hanna notes is a traditional literary metaphor, exemplified by Dante's Beatrice.[13] Consonant with this interpretation is the shot's radiant light, which serves as a metaphor for God in Dante's *Paradise*. The metaphors of heaven are consistent with previous reference in *The Black Hole* to Dante and serve as a contrast to the inferno seen immediately before in the film.

The descent into the underworld is an integral part of the archetype of the quest, and the idea of the quest resonates through the dialog of *The Black Hole*. Reinhardt urges his visitors from the *Palomino* to "embark on man's greatest journey" and to "travel where no man has dared to go." Reinhardt perceives them to be "on the brink of a feat unparalleled in space exploration." He speaks fervently of "other worlds to be explored, life dreams unrealized," and compares himself to "Columbus, just before he discovered the New World."

Reinhardt's quest is for irrational experience. Much is made in *The Black Hole* of Reinhardt's technological expertise, especially of the *Cygnus*' design capability to defy the universal human experience of gravity. We are also told that Reinhardt has created "enough instant energy" to "supply all of Earth." Yet Reinhardt trivializes his technological accomplishments, and defines them only as means to an end. The end is, for Reinhardt, not technology or rational knowledge, but mystical transcendence represented by the black hole, "the one final mystery that has eluded mankind."

In summary, the focal image of *The Black Hole* functions as a visual metaphor for the sacred, order, unity, and eternal time. The black hole is a symbol that unites the antinomic pairs of conscious/unconscious, water/fire, immersion/emersion, death/rebirth, hell/heaven. The black hole is further associated with the quest for transcendent experience. Through the symbolic expression of archetypes, the film advocates (1) the abandonment of rationalist ideals and (2) the reclamation of religious experience and the unconscious mind. The titular image of *The Black Hole* compensates scientism by invoking archetypal unity.

Notes

[1] The author gratefully acknowledges Prof. J. P. Telotte for his helpful suggestions for revision of the manuscript.

The Black Hole's storyline begins with the discovery of a black hole by a small exploratory spacecraft, the *Palomino*. Near the black hole, and mysteriously resisting its enormous gravitational attraction, is an older exploratory spaceship, the *Cygnus*. The *Palomino* crew investigates the *Cygnus*, which is commanded by a brilliant, mad scientist, Dr. Hans Reinhardt (Maximillian Schell). Reinhardt reluctantly receives the visitors and then schemes to add the *Palomino*'s scientists to the *Cygnus*' crew, which now consists only of robots and former humans he has mechanized. Reinhardt's obsession to explore the black hole is thwarted by an armed conflict and coincidental meteor storm. Reinhardt, his robots, and the *Cygnus* are

consumed by the black hole. Only four survivors of the *Palomino* crew escape in a tiny probe ship which successfully traverses the black hole. Having experienced passage through the black hole, the four heroes exit the reverse side of the hole, and the film enigmatically ends.

[2] C. G. Jung, *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, trans. H. G. and Cary F. Baynes (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1928), p. 248.

[3] Lane Roth, "The Rejection of Rationalism in Recent Science Fiction Films," *Philosophy in Context*, 11 (1981), 42-55.

[4] Isaac Asimov, *The Collapsing Universe* (New York: Walker, 1977), p. 128.

[5] John Culhane, "The Remarkable Visions of Peter Ellenshaw," *American Film*, 4, No. 10 (1979), 24, Quoting Ellenshaw.

[6] Jung, *Contributions*, p. 235.

[7] C. G. Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959), p. 18. All further references to this work appear in the text and are cited as *FS*.

[8] This and subsequent quotations not cited are transcriptions of the film's dialog.

[9] John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), p. 260. See entire Ch. 11.

[10] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest-Harcourt, 1959), p. 21. All further references to this work appear in the text.

[11] Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 232.

[12] A superimposition of film results from a double exposure providing a "see-through" effect, which is often used as a visual metaphor for the insubstantial nature of ghosts.

[13] Charles Bartruff Hanna, *The Face of the Deep: The Religious Ideas of C. G. Jung* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), p. 132. This author gratefully acknowledges Mike Kirkpatrick for his suggestion that the superimposed woman was Beatrice.